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CA Officials Want To Allow Oil Industry To Dump Toxic Waste Into Aquifers, Exempt Them From Federal Protection

Mike Gaworecki | June 12, 2016

By Mike Gaworecki • Sunday, June 12, 2016 - 06:03



California officials announced on Wednesday that they will seek the exemption of as many as 60 underground aquifers from federal protections so that the oil industry can use them to dispose of toxic oilfield wastewater.

Regulators with the state's Division of Oil, Gas and Geothermal Resources (DOGGR) said they will submit the necessary applications to the U.S. Environmental Protection

Agency over the next four months to exempt aquifers in Monterey, Ventura, Kern and other counties from federal laws such as the Safe Drinking Water Act.

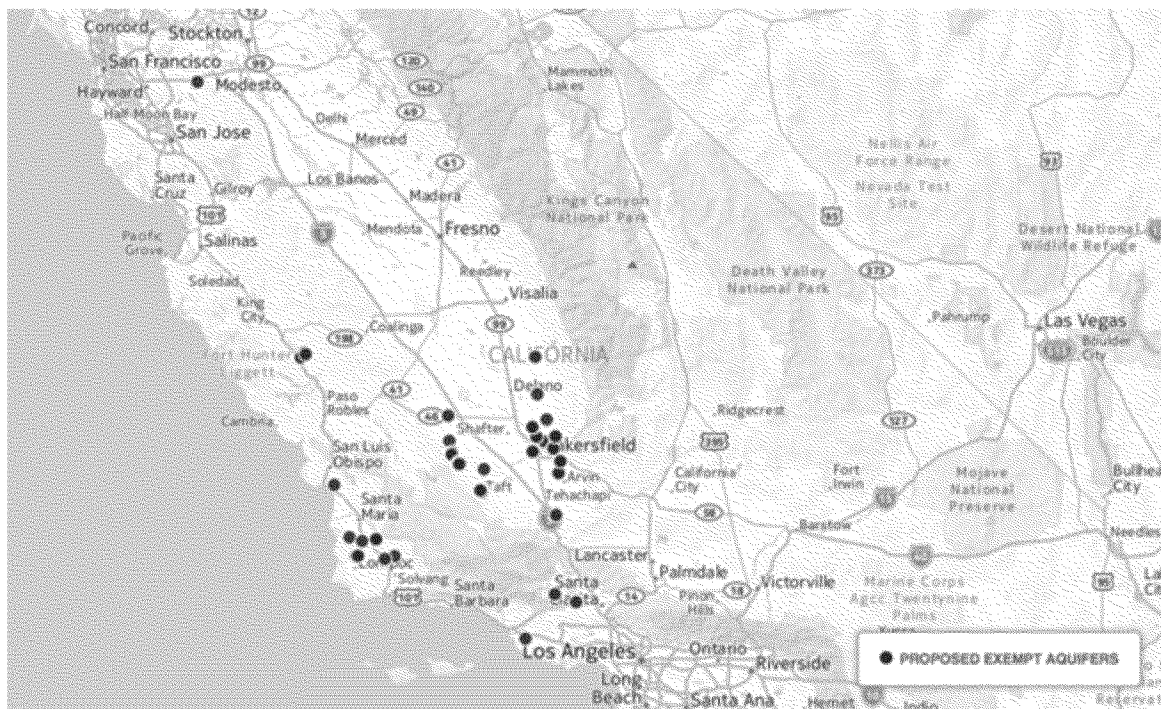
In a [statement](#) issued in response to DOGGR's plan, the Center for Biological Diversity (CBD), which has put together an [interactive map](#) of the aquifers in question, noted that "Oil wastewater commonly contains cancer-causing benzene and other pollutants, according to [DOGGR]'s own testing. Flowback fluid coming out of fracked wells in California contains benzene at levels as high as 1,500 times the federal limits for drinking water, according to oil companies' own tests."

Over the course of late 2014 and early 2015, DOGGR gradually admitted to having [improperly permitted thousands of injection wells](#) to operate in aquifers that should have been protected under the Safe Drinking Water Act.

In the wake of the revelations, state senators [denounced DOGGR's handling of California's underground injection program](#) as "corrupt, inept, and woefully mismanaged." One senator pointed out that "There has been a serious imbalance between the role [of] regulating the oil and gas industry and the role of protecting the public."

A very small fraction — a few dozen, at most — of those illegal injection wells have been shut down so far. The EPA has given California until February 2017 to bring oil companies and their injection wells into compliance with the law.

State officials are apparently hoping the EPA will allow the rest of the illegal wells to continue operating by exempting the aquifers from legal protection altogether.



Map of aquifers DOGGR is applying to have exempted from federal safe drinking water laws by the [Center for Biological Diversity](#).

DOGGR announced on Wednesday that it would file up to 60 applications for aquifer exemptions in a conference call with a number of environmental organizations that have been pressuring the agency to release a list of the applications.

“State oil regulators’ disturbing proposal to sacrifice dozens of aquifers to the oil industry is an enormous threat to California’s water supplies,” said Hollin Kretzmann, an attorney with the CBD. “The federal EPA must stop this incredibly foolish plan to let oil companies dump polluted waste fluid into these underground water sources.”

Kretzmann told DeSmog that it’s difficult to count the aquifers that actually overlap with the illegal injection wells already in operation because DOGGR “has been so terrible at making that information available.”

The lists DOGGR has released of the illegal injection wells only list the oil field, not the aquifer.

“For example, there are dozens of wells operating in the ‘Round Mountain’ oil field, but according to the aquifer exemption application, there are at least four protected aquifers in that field, all at different depths, so it’s hard to know which wells are associated with which protected aquifer,” Kretzmann said.

But it is possible to approximate. “It looks like there are roughly 48 oil fields that will be proposed for exemption through 60 applications (some fields have multiple applications),” Kretzmann added.

In other words, DOGGR is pushing for exemptions for the majority of injection wells that DOGGR itself has admitted are illegal.

“Rather than protect these groundwater resources, DOGGR is giving them away to the oil companies,” Kretzmann said.

*Image Credit: The San Ardo Oil Field, a large oil field in Monterey County, California.
Photo via [Wikimedia Commons](#).*